

A Gathering of the **Tribes**

The Grateful Dead by Rebecca Matalon

The Grateful Dead

David Hammons (January 26 – March 4, 2011)

L & M Arts

That David Hammons is one of the most influential, iconic artists of the last five decades is undeniable. His vast body of work, from the 1970s to the present, traces a practice that plays with art historical conventions associated with assemblage and appropriation while investigating the political and social conditions of post-civil rights black identity. Hammons' artistic history is perhaps what makes his latest exhibition, *David Hammons* (January 26 – March 4, 2011), at L & M Arts at once jarring and seemingly humble. The exhibition has had no shortage of rave reviews and whatever modesty New York's most esteemed critics are prone to has vanished in favor of gushing praise. This is not to say that the presentation at the Upper East Side townhouse is undeserving but that the reviews thus far, while perhaps accurate in their glowing assessment of Hammons' latest fête (after a noteworthy and much elaborated sojourn from exhibition), do not articulate exactly what makes this exhibition awe-inducing.

Hammons' historical significance and influence on a younger generation of black artists working with notions of identity politics and race is readily apparent. (I am thinking most recently of the work of Dave McKenzie, Mark Bradford, Shinique Smith and Demetrius Oliver, three of who, like Hammons himself, are alumni of the Studio Museum in Harlem's Artists-in-Residence program.) To be sure, to limit an analysis of Hammons' significance and influence to a younger generation of black artists would be fallacious. While the subject matter of his work does indeed deal with the specificity of black experience, his tendency towards Conceptualism and his varying use of media from photography and sculpture to video, is of great importance to an entire generation of artists working in a time void of a singular, defining artistic movement. That Hammons has lived through the rise and fall of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Postmodernism proper is significant. Looking back on the trajectory of the artist's work, from the early body prints, performances and videos, to the refuse assemblages of human hair or chicken bones, his exhibition at L & M becomes increasingly

poignant. Gone are the one-liners and in their stead is a concise, thoughtful, and exceedingly well-edited display of new works (modest in light of today's curatorial urge to fill space and hide those ghastly white walls).

The majority of the exhibited works take, at base, the traditional form of painting. Yet, Hammons obscures the often-pastel hues and gestural swaths of color, casing the canvases beneath drop cloths, towels, plastic sheeting, garbage bags and, in one case, a wooden armoire. In *Untitled* (2008), the painted surface peeps out minimally from the upper left corner and bottom of an opaque blue plastic tarp. While, in *Untitled* (2010), a grimy, ripped and torn, clear plastic is draped and folded, distorting the surface to create an ever more ethereal and muddied mix of pigment. For *Untitled* (2009), Hammons cut open and affixed a familiar black garbage bag to the surface of a grey and white canvas. The original red plastic drawstring cuts diagonally across the surface, bisecting the painting. Hammons' play with material and color is wonderful and it would be tempting to limit oneself to a purely formal analysis of the works included or to assess them solely as a non-painter's sneering jab at painting in general. More than an exhibition of paintings, *David Hammons* is an exhibition about painting, and perhaps more specifically, the history of art, from Abstract Expressionism to the present. And while there may indeed be some elbows (and fingers) thrust, the fact that the works incorporate the painterly traditions of Abstract Expressionism, the industrial materials long associated with minimal art, and an overall style consistent with postmodernist practice, is in no way negligible.

That the exhibition, green lighted by the artist himself after a series of wayward shows erected by Harlem's Triple Candie and Chelsea's David Zwirner, is on display at L & M, with its crown moldings, spiral staircase and parquet floors, is of no little consequence. Despite the artist's often reclusive tendencies, he has been vocal about his work's display, if not seemingly inconsistent, at one moment proclaiming his singular interest in exhibiting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and at another following in line with Institutional Critique's identification of the museum as a tomb. In a 2001 *New York Times* article, Hammons' disdain for contemporary American art museums is palpable. Referring to their holdings as "the grateful dead," Hammons readily acknowledges the space of the museum as one in which art (and artist) humbly take the big sleep. Reflecting on Hammons' word play, the exhibition at L & M becomes increasingly formidable. (Walking distance from The Met, the location and architecture of the gallery is certainly closer akin to New York's uptown institution than Chelsea's sprawling white cubes.) From Robert Rauschenberg, Giovanni Anselmo (and Arte Povera in general) to the more contemporary ad-hoc assemblages undoubtedly inspired by Hammons himself that comprised the New Museum's 2007 exhibition *Unmonumental*, the press-release-less display (at Hammons' insistence) resurrects a half century of artistic production (made mostly by white men) if only to willingly bid it a good night.